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The Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series

Alfred Fromm

MARKETING CALIFORNIA WINE AND BRANDY

With an Introduction by
Leon D. Adams

An Interview Conducted by
Ruth Teiser
in 1984

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ALFRED FROMM

1980

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> Alfred Fromm, "Marketing California Wine and Brandy," an oral history conducted 1984 by Ruth Teiser, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, 1984.

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PREFACE

The California wine industry oral history series, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated in 1969 through the action and with the financing of the Wine Advisory Board, a state marketing order organization which ceased operation in 1975. In 1983 it was reinstituted as The Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series with donations from The Wine Spectator California Scholarship Foundation. The selection of those to be interviewed is made by a committee consisting of James D. Hart, director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; John A. De Luca, president of the Wine Institute, the statewide winery organization; Maynard A. Amerine, Emeritus Professor of Viticulture and Enology, University of California, Davis; the chairman of the board of directors of the Wine Institute, who is elected annually; Ruth Teiser, series project director, and Marvin R. Shanken, trustee of The Wine Spectator California Scholarship Foundation.

The purpose of the series is to record and preserve information on California grape growing and wine making that has existed only in the memories of wine men. In some cases their recollections go back to the early years of this century, before Prohibition. These recollections are of particular value because the Prohibition period saw the disruption of not only the industry itself but also the orderly recording and preservation of records of its activities. Little has been written about the industry from late in the last century until Repeal. There is a real paucity of information on the Prohibition years (1920-1933), although some commercial wine making did continue under supervision of the Prohibition Department. The material in this series on that period, as well as the discussion of the remarkable development of the wine industry in subsequent years (as yet treated analytically in few writings) will be of aid to historians. Of particular value is the fact that frequently several individuals have discussed the same subjects and events or expressed opinions on the same ideas, each from his own point of view.

Research underlying the interviews has been conducted principally in the University libraries at Berkeley and Davis, the California State Library, and in the library of the Wine Institute, which has made its collection of in many cases unique materials readily available for the purpose.

Three master indices for the entire series are being prepared, one of general subjects, one of wines, one of grapes by variety. These will be available to researchers at the conclusion of the series in the Regional Oral History Office and at the library of the Wine Institute.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to recent California history. The office is headed by Willa K. Baum and is under the administrative supervision of James D. Hart, the director of The Bancroft Library.

Ruth Teiser
Project Director
The Wine Spectator California
Winemen Oral History Series

10 September 1984
Regional Oral History Office
486 The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

CALIFORNIA WINE INDUSTRY INTERVIEWS

Interviews Completed by 1984

Leon D. Adams *Revitalizing the California Wine Industry* 1974

Maynard A. Amerine *The University of California and the State's Wine Industry* 1971

Philo Biane *Wine Making in Southern California and Recollections of Fruit Industries, Inc.* 1972

Burke H. Critchfield, Carl F. Wente, and Andrew G. Frericks *The California Wine Industry During the Depression* 1972

William V. Cruess *A Half Century of Food and Wine Technology* 1967

Alfred Fromm *Marketing California Wine and Brandy* 1984

Maynard A. Joslyn *A Technologist Views the California Wine Industry* 1974

Horace O. Lanza and Harry Baccigaluppi *California Grape Products and Other Wine Enterprises* 1971

Louis M. Martini and Louis P. Martini *Winemakers of the Napa Valley* 1973

Louis P. Martini *A Family Winery and the California Wine Industry* 1984

Otto E. Meyer *California Premium Wines and Brandy* 1973

Harold P. Olmo *Plant Genetics and New Grape Varieties* 1976

Antonio Perelli-Minetti *A Life in Wine Making* 1975

Louis A. Petri *The Petri Family in the Wine Industry* 1971

Jefferson E. Peyser *The Law and the California Wine Industry* 1974

Lucius Powers *The Fresno Area and the California Wine Industry* 1974

Victor Repetto and Sydney J. Block *Perspectives on California Wines* 1976

Edmund A. Rossi *Italian Swiss Colony and the Wine Industry* 1971

A. Setrakian *A Leader of the San Joaquin Valley Grape Industry* 1977

André Tchelistcheff *Grapes, Wine, and Ecology* 1983

Brother Timothy *The Christian Brothers as Winemakers* 1974

Ernest A. Wente *Wine Making in the Livermore Valley* 1971

Albert J. Winkler *Viticultural Research at UC Davis (1921 - 1971)* 1973

INTRODUCTION

Alfred Fromm's interview is a fascinating narrative of the contributions by an emigre German expert in premium wine marketing to the post-Repeal advancement of California's grape and wine industry. Historians of the industry and of its important by-product--brandy--will find explanations in his interview of some hithertoo little-understood aspects of the industry's progress since the late 1930's.

What his modest recital does not fully explain, is the part played by the late Samuel Bronfman, who headed the worldwide Seagram wine and spirits empire, in enabling Fromm and his associates to build Paul Masson Vineyards and The Christian Brothers into major factors in the industry.

In 1943 during the Second World War, when the U.S. government restricted whiskey production, Bronfman had Seagrams purchase the Mt. Tivy winery in the San Joaquin Valley, and also the then-small Masson mountain winery in Saratoga, from Martin Ray. Bronfman's purpose was to market brandy made at Mt. Tivy under the premium-quality name of Paul Masson. When that plan was dropped, Seagrams sold Mt. Tivy to The Christian Brothers, and part ownership of the Paul Masson vineyard and winery to the partnership of Fromm and Franz Sichel.

I have known Alfred Fromm since 1938, when, while still residing in New York, he first visited me and my then-associates at the Wine Institute offices in San Francisco. I later met his father and his brother Norman, and was privileged to witness each stage of their achievement, with brother-in-law Otto Meyer, in building Paul Masson into one of the nation's leading wineries. Visiting Brother John and Brother Timothy at the Brothers' winery in Napa County, I also observed the renaming, inspired by Fromm, of their wines from "Mont La Salle" to "The Christian Brothers." Brother John shared Fromm's long-held view that wines of different years should be blended in order to provide consumers with uniform flavor year after year. This is why the Brothers and Paul Masson Vineyards resisted for many years and until quite recently, the trend toward vintage labeling of premium California wines.

The Christian Brothers Wine Museum (The Wine Museum of San Francisco), established in 1974 by Alfred Fromm, was an unselfish effort to acquaint Americans with the noble cultural

history of wine. He made valiant efforts to preserve the Museum until 1984, when, after the sale of Fromm and Sichel, Seagrams decided to move the Museum to their headquarters in Ontario, Canada.

Leon D. Adams
Author of The Wines of America

27 August 1984
Sausalito, California

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Alfred Fromm was interviewed on two successive mornings, May 3 and May 4, 1984, at his office at 655 Beach Street in San Francisco, shortly before the building was taken over by Seagrams, which, as he explained in the interview, had purchased it the previous year. Final conferences on the interview and the photographs to illustrate it were held in his new office at 655 Montgomery Street in San Francisco.

Mr. Fromm's characteristic mildness and firmness are reflected in the interviews. A courtly man with the manners as well as the speech rhythms of his native land, he spoke with deliberation but without hesitation. His life as a highly successful salesman of wines and brandy in the United States was built upon the principles instilled in him during his early years with his family firm in Germany, principles which he articulated in the interview.

Leaving Germany during the Hitler regime, he chose the United States because of the freedom here, as he explained, and that freedom, combined with his diligence and marketing ability, created his success. Together with Franz Sichel, whom he had known in Germany and met again in the United States through Samuel Bronfman of Seagrams, he created the firm of Fromm and Sichel in 1945 as successor to Picker-Linz, through which he had represented The Christian Brothers since 1937. His part in the history of the development of The Christian Brothers' wines and brandy is told here, as well as the part played by his brother-in-law, Otto Meyer. Their part in the rehabilitation of the Paul Masson winery is also discussed here. It was during their leadership of Masson that the development of the Salinas Valley as a vineyard district began, when Masson and Mirassou, both looking for land beyond Santa Clara County, joined forces to investigate the potentialities of Monterey County.

The initial interview transcript required little editing. Mr. Fromm corrected some minor errors and added a number of dates from his records. He preferred the spelling Seagram's, with an apostrophe.

Related oral history interviews in this series are those of Otto E. Meyer, CALIFORNIA PREMIUM WINES AND BRANDY, completed in 1973, and Brother Timothy, THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS AS WINEMAKERS, completed in 1974.

Ruth Teiser
Interviewer-Editor

10 September 1984
Regional Oral History Office
486 The Bancroft Library
University of California at Berkeley

I GERMANY 1905-1936

[Interview 1: May 3, 1984]##

The Firm of N. Fromm

Fromm: The firm of N. Fromm was started by my great-grandfather, Nathan Fromm. He was a schoolteacher in a small wine village, and I'm told--I didn't know him--that he had eleven children. The salary of a schoolteacher in those days was really minimal, and there never was enough money to feed and clothe the children and buy them shoes. So my great-grandfather then started to help some of the winegrowers in this small wine village and advised them how to make better wines as he was a more educated man, and he taught them about sanitation and so on.

As a result these vintners came up with a better product. They were not very flush with money either, and they paid him very often by giving him some wine as his fee.

So then he started to sell the wine and gradually built up a little business. And after some years my great-grandfather decided he should go into the wine business because he could not make a living as a teacher, that he would buy the wines from those vintners he knew in the Franconia district of Germany. It became after a little while quite a nice business. He traveled within Bavaria (because the Franconia wine district is in Bavaria). He died, I understand, when he was in his sixties, and then my grandfather took over.

By that time the family was already in the wine business. My grandfather, Josef Fromm, developed the business further. He died very young, when he was in his early forties, and I did not know him either. Then my father, Max Fromm, who was thirteen years old when his father died, took over and left school, because someone had to make a living. He was an unusually capable man and developed later

Fromm: on into one of the best-known wine tasters in Germany, and became then an adviser to the government, and over the years made the firm of N. Fromm one of the leading firms in Germany.

The firm was at that time in Kitzingen on the River Main where there were very many small wine firms, but our firm of N. Fromm was the largest there.

Apprenticeship and Studies, 1920-1924

Fromm: When I was fifteen years old I had graduated from middle high school. I was apprenticed to a large wine firm, Feist and Reinach, in Bingen-on-the-Rhine, and I served a three-year apprenticeship. And, as it was in those days, my father had to pay for my education at this wine firm. But you really learned the wine business right from the ground up, starting with the vineyards and moving into the cellars. You learn an awful lot between fifteen and eighteen that you don't learn later on. If you are an apprentice in Germany, you are not nothing; you are less than nothing. [laughs]

But it was very good training. In the winter you had to be in the office at six o'clock in the morning and stoking the fire for the office, and later on at eleven o'clock go out and get the sausages and the bread for the people for their second breakfast. But I really learned the wine business.

The owner of the firm where I was apprenticed was one of the outstanding men in the wine industry. His name was Joseph Guembel. After I was there for two years, he took me into the wine tasting room. There was every day a wine tasting between twelve and one. I arranged the glasses and made notes for him, and then he said, "Try this," and "Try that." I learned from Herr Guembel how to taste and evaluate wine. He started to like me, and I was very much interested. In fact, I never wanted to be in any other business since I was a young kid, than the wine business. And I learned an awful lot. When I was eighteen years old, I thought I knew a great deal about German wine. But you know, when you are very young you don't know how many things you don't know.

Selling Wine for N. Fromm, 1924-1936

Fromm: So after I was through with my apprenticeship I went to the Weinbau-Schule, which was an agricultural college in Geisenheim,

Fromm: which in those days was the leading viticultural school in Germany, and stayed there for about a year, taking various courses in wine chemistry, wine treatment, and so on.

After that--by that time I was nineteen years old—I joined our firm in Kitzingen. My father then insisted that after I had worked another year in the cellars that I go out and be conversant with the selling business of wine, because the marketing of wine was always a problem for everyone.

So I started to travel extensively in Germany when I was twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two years old, and I worked very, very hard. My father insisted that I only call on new customers. I was paid commission, but only half of what regular salesmen were paid, because that was a German educational idea, that a son during his learning period should not make as much as everyone else, but I made good money anyhow. [laughing]

When I was twenty-three, twenty-four years, I had already in my travels six or eight young men with me whom I trained and who became good salesmen afterwards.

Teiser: To whom did you sell?

Fromm: We sold mostly to consumers.

Teiser: Direct?

Fromm: Direct. The wine business in those days in Germany was that way. You called on consumers, and it was a tough job because very many people didn't want to see you. But somehow I managed to do quite well.

In 1924 our firm started to go into the export business, and I traveled very extensively then in the export business and became director of exports when I was twenty-five years of age. I traveled in England, in Belgium, in Holland, and particularly up in the northern states, in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Norway.

First Travels in the United States

Fromm: We were advised by our American agents that Prohibition would be repealed in the United States, which finally took place on December 5, 1933. As I was the oldest son, I was sent here to build a market. (I had a younger brother who was in the business, too,

Fromm: Paul, who's now in the import wine business in Chicago) On December 4, I arrived in New York, and I never have seen such excitement.

Teiser: Would you describe it?

Fromm: I never had been in such a large city as New York City. The people were all celebrating, and there were a lot of people who were drunk because it was the first time they could buy legally alcohol. On the other hand, the Depression was still on, and the repeal of Prohibition gave the people a great moral lift. They felt things would get better, so they took it as a good omen that times would improve, which fortunately they did. But in those days there was a tremendous amount of unemployment and very great hardships to which most of the people were not accustomed.

I went to our agents, Picker-Linz importers in New York, and worked with them because none of the partners in the firm had anything to do with wine before. They had ran other businesses, and I was the only one who knew something about wine. And then I traveled very extensively throughout the United States. I had a little Ford car and I went from one end to the other, from north to south, from east to west. I think I have been in every city of fifty or a hundred thousand at that time existing in the United States.

It was very, very difficult then because American people were not used to drink wine, and it was mostly an upper class that knew a little about wine, that had traveled to Europe before. But I managed to sell quite a bit and built a net of distributors.

The most interesting experience I had was when I went in January of 1934 to Los Angeles, because I had heard there were many movie stars who made a tremendous amount of money, and there were no licenses yet at that time, I had some connections to Mr. Carl Laemmle, who was head of Universal Pictures, and he gave me some recommendations. I called on some of the big movie stars, and I was amazed how well they received me. They gave me very nice orders for expensive wines. In those days we had those fabulous 1921 wines. You could get sixty or ninety dollars a case--for ninety dollars you got a Schloss Johannisberg '21 Auslese, and it was a tremendous price.

Then I wanted to call on William Randolph Hearst. I called him from my hotel in Los Angeles. He didn't talk to me, and his secretary told me they would come back to me and let me know if Mr. Hearst could see me. What I didn't know was that they were

Fromm: checking up on me, who I was, because, the idea that someone could think I might be a gangster or bootlegger never occurred to me. [laughter]

Teiser: Let me interrupt you. You said somebody could be a gangster. There was a good deal of opprobrium, was there not, about any wine man, that carried over from Prohibition?

Fromm: Yes.

Teiser: Did you feel it?

Fromm: Yes, I did, and I was very much upset by it, because when people talked about wine, they said we are in the booze business, and that hurt my feelings very much, because the wine business in Europe was always a highly respected business and really had nothing to do with hard liquor. I hardly knew any hard liquor. When I came to this country for the first time I tasted American whiskey and Scotch whiskey because I never before had an opportunity to do that. At home we had some German brandy that was always considered good for your health, and you drank it once in a while. But as children we never got any hard liquor. But we always got a little wine with dinner. So I grew up with wine, and I must say until today--I am seventy-nine years old--I have drunk wine every day. I don't touch anything during the day, but I have half a bottle of wine for my dinner, and I consider this better than vitamins or Valium.

When I called on Mr. Hearst, he gave me orders for some rare, immensely expensive wine, the very finest that was made in Germany. Hesitatingly, I said to Mr. Hearst, "You know, Mr. Hearst, that wine sells for three hundred dollars a case." I have never seen or tasted anything like it since then.

Teiser: What was it?

Fromm: Nineteen eleven Steinberger Kabinett. Trockenbeerenauslese from the Prussian domain in Eberbach. It was marked "Jahrhundert Wein" by the Prussian government and it really was.

Then I offered him some other very outstanding 1920 and 1921 Rheingau wines and Franconia wines, and he gave me an order for thirty cases or so. It amounted to over five thousand dollars, which in those days was an enormous amount of money.

Teiser: Where did you meet him?

Fromm: Mr. Hearst visited with us when he was in Bad Nauheim, a very well known health spa. There was a Profesor Groedel whom he consulted,

Fromm: and then after he felt better he wanted to make a few excursions, and he came to Bingen, which was not very far, and visited our winery and said to my father, "When your son comes over to America, have him call on me." Of course, we took this for a regular invitation and didn't know that this was often just a polite saying like "Let us have lunch together sometime."

Teiser: Where here did you meet him? In San Francisco?

Fromm: No. I was invited to San Simeon. He sent his plane. I was received by Marion Davies, who was a very charming and nice lady. I was a young, inexperienced man, and she was very kind to me. I was introduced to a lot of people, many of them famous movie stars, and other big people but I never had heard their names before, so it didn't make any difference. [laughing] But in those days a young European, who was in the wine business, was something new for better educated people, or people who had traveled widely. So apparently I filled the bill.

Teiser: Did you go to San Simeon other times also?

Fromm: No.

I got some other recommendations from them. Some of the most famous movie stars gave me very nice orders. In those days if you paid for a case of wine fifty, sixty or ninety dollars, it was a big price. So I sent these orders to Germany, and I spent altogether six months in the United States and then went back.

Teiser: Were you in Northern California?

Fromm: Yes.

Teiser: Did people in San Francisco buy the same way?

Fromm: Being more conservative, they didn't buy this way, but I called on Mr. Paul Verdier, who was the president and owner, I believe, of the City of Paris. A Frenchman. Quite well known, quite well versed in wines. He gave me a very nice order.

We did some good business in the U.S.A. and actually between 1933 and 1936 my own sales amounted to almost 26 percent of the wine imports from Germany. Of course, the total business was small in those days, but they were all good wines, because I could see right from the beginning that the only chance German wines would have would be to sell the very best, and address myself to a special group of consumers; it was not for the average man who didn't drink wine and drank whiskey or beer.

Teiser: That certainly gave you a good idea of the United States, then.

Fromm: Yes.

Teiser: At that time did you like it well enough to think you might ever come back here?

Fromm: The fact is at that time the Nazis were already in power, and our family is Jewish, so it was always a consideration: should one stay, could one stay in Germany or not? After my first visit to the United States I made up my mind this is the place I wanted to live. I had traveled in England, and I liked it very much there. But I loved the freedom here and the chances offered. If you did the right thing, you really were on your own, something which to a German was entirely new.

So I came back by the middle of 1934 to Germany, and I was traveling in the European countries for the export of our wines, where we did quite well. I think we sold to about forty foreign countries altogether, our German wines.

The next year again I went to America and spent again in '35 and '36 six months each year traveling and completing a net of distributors. I got acquainted with a lot of very good people. They were very kind to me, and I really felt it was the place I wanted to live.

II THE UNITED STATES SINCE 1936

Partnersip in Picker-Linz, New York

Fromm: By 1936 the Nazi situation looked very threatening, and I decided that we had to get out of Germany. I was the first one of our family to come to the United States. I got married in 1936 to a girl that I had courted since she was sixteen years old, Hanna Gruenbaum. We are married now forty-eight years and we are still very happy.

Teiser: You came to New York first?

Fromm: Yes. We came to New York. Then the firm of Picker-Linz, who were our agents, offered me a small partnership. It was a very small firm. And we came with almost nothing because we couldn't take anything out of Germany. They let us take out some furniture and our clothes and some personal belongings, but no money.

So I became a partner in this firm with a minimum investment of maybe a thousand or two thousand dollars advanced by my wife, and this is the way we started here in this country.

I went for Picker-Linz to Europe quite a few times in the following years, in '36, '37, as they were in the imported wine business. And I traveled extensively in Europe in the wine countries, in France, Italy, Spain, and so on.

Teiser: Buying for them?

Fromm: Buying the wine, because I was the only one who was qualified to do that.

Teiser: Were the wines shipped in bulk or were they bottled?

Fromm: We only bought bottled goods.

Alfred Fromm in 1936, the year he came to the United States.

Alfred Fromm at an interview conference, July 19, 1984.

Fromm: But I could see the preparation for war of the Nazis. I saw the underground bunkers in Germany, and I saw in the Ruhr, which was a heavy industrial part of Germany, the armaments they produced. I could see that this would lead to a war. I told my partners that one day we will be completely cut off from our foreign sources, that wines cannot be shipped anymore, and that if we wanted to remain in this business, we'd better make sure we find an American source of supply.

Many people didn't believe that there was a war coming. My partners were skeptical, too, but they said, "Well, if you are so convinced, why don't you go to California and see what you can do?"

I just want to show you how I got into the California wine business.

Teiser: That's a missing link that I had not known.

Fromm: So in the middle of 1937 I came to California. At that time there were just a few wineries, and I looked around and called on every winery in California to see what could be done.

Teiser: What was your impression? You had been to wineries all over the world--what did you think of the California wine industry at that time from that survey you made?

Fromm: The industry as such in those days hardly did exist. The aftermath of Prohibition was still very much in evidence. There were many vineyards with the wrong kind of grapes. The equipment in the wineries was very old because there was no money to replace it. The winery buildings were very old. There was really nothing there to be particularly attractive. Most of the wineries that I called on said, "Well, we would be glad to give you the agency, but you must put some money in," and this was something that we didn't have.

Teiser: Let me take you back again. You had a sudden view of something that most people saw developing. What were the outstanding wineries among those that you visited?

Fromm: There was Beaulieu. There was [Louis M.] Martini. There was Wente [Bros.]. And there was Martin Ray, who had the Paul Masson winery. There were maybe four or five premium wineries that made quite acceptable wine.

Teiser: Was there a quality relationship to the fine wines of Europe?

Fromm: No, absolutely not. However, as I traveled so extensively in California, and particularly in the Napa Valley, and as I knew something about vineyards and saw the soil and the various scientific reports that had been made, I had the feeling that if this was handled properly, we can make in California a wine that ultimately could be world class. I was a young man, but of course when you are young you are enthusiastic and optimistic. I felt it could be done.

Association with the Christian Brothers, 1937-1983

Joining Efforts with the Brothers

Fromm: So in my travels I came to the Christian Brothers in Napa. The Christian Brothers at that time were in financial difficulties. As you know, they are a religious order of the Catholic church, and they had built monasteries and some colleges like St. Mary's College, during the heyday of the boom, and then when the Depression started they couldn't pay their bonds any more, and they were in some sort of bankruptcy, like today we have Chapter 11 or something like that.

So I called on them. There was Brother John, who was the head of the winery, who was a few years younger than I, and Brother Timothy, who was probably two years younger than I, and the three of us, we put our heads together and we said, "Well, we have to do something," because the only way the Brothers could get out of their financial difficulty was to sell some wines.

##

Inasmuch as they were not bootleggers, they had accumulated an inventory of old wines which they did use for sacramental wine. This inventory was among the best in California.

So we put our heads together and we were good partners, because they had no money and we had no money [laughing]. But we all were young, and I felt we had to make a success, otherwise we wouldn't eat, because many more members of my family had arrived in the U.S. without hardly any money.

Teiser: Did you consider an association with any other wineries before that?

Fromm: No, I really didn't. None really appealed to me as much as Christian Brothers, and one reason for it was, too, that I had a great feeling for the integrity of religious organizations in the wine business, because in Germany, particularly on the Moselle, some of the finest vineyards are in the hands of religious organizations, and also in Franconia. In the Rheingau the church always had very important holdings of some of the very finest vineyards. That was one reason why I thought it might be a good thing to inspire confidence in the consumer. Even so, I was connected with Christian Brothers for 46 years and we never mentioned the religious angle, because it's a poor way to sell. If you ask a Catholic to buy Christian Brothers wine because it's made by a Catholic order, it's a poor way to do business. So this never in any way came into play.

So in 1938 I spent about four months at Mont La Salle vineyards in Napa up where the monastery is. I slept in the bishop's room but I always had to get up very early because at five-thirty one of the Brothers came through all the corridors with a bell and said get up for mass. And breakfast was at six-thirty. If you were not there at six-thirty there was no breakfast because they did not run a hotel [laughing].

But I got up early, and Brother John, Brother Timothy and I went into the winery and we took a sample of every barrel, a few hundred small and larger, we tasted the wines, and we made some blends. At that time there were no varietal wines, so we blended a burgundy and a sauterne, some Riesling, and a few wines of this sort. Then by late fall of 1938 we were ready to go to into the market.

Beginning to Market Christian Brothers Wines

Fromm: The wines were considered in those days premium wines. (They wouldn't be considered so today, but after all this was 1938, 46 years ago). We developed a unique label. In fact my wife, who is more artistically inclined than I, first drew it up with lipstick. We thought a Christian Brothers label in the shape of a triptych would be the right label, and we had it printed by a printer who helped us a little, because money was so scarce that we really had to save every penny, and we did a lot of the work ourselves. Brother John and Brother Timothy worked in the winery and I worked in it too, so it was really a joint undertaking.

Fromm: When we started out to sell the wine, first in New York and then in some other places--

Teiser: Through Picker-Linz?

Fromm: Through Picker-Linz as exclusive agents for the Brothers--it was very hard to sell California wines. There were really only two lines of American wine available that made some claim to quality and that had wider distribution that the few premium wineries in California. They were Taylor, New York, and Christian Brothers. Those two lines were the two lines that were in almost every store in New York and in many other states.

Teiser: I have been told that wine drinkers in New York were used to the taste of European wines so that they had to get accustomed to California wines. Is that correct?

Fromm: It is correct to some extent. Those were wine drinkers, and it took us quite a few years before we really got to the consumer that was used to European wines, because at that time we hadn't got American people yet to drink table wine. They drank sweet wine, port and sherry, also because it was the cheapest form of fortified alcohol. The tax on fortified wine was much lower than it was on distilled spirits. But we were quite successful in a small way, and we then extended the business into New Jersey, into the middle West, into Chicago and California. I traveled very extensively six, seven months a year calling on distributors, traveling as a salesman, because we were in fact missionary men. Most of the wholesalers said there was no chance to do anything in the wine business anyway, "Why do you waste your time here?" I answered, "Give it a chance and you will be surprised."

So the business grew in a small way, and we opened up maybe 25 states within two or three years, and then in 1941 World War II broke out.

Teiser: Did you before World War II establish a pricing policy that was unusual?

Fromm: Yes. Our wines were all priced at the same level. In New York it was one dollar a bottle, which was then a very high price because you could buy a lot of California wine for 35 to 40 cents. One dollar a bottle. We had this price throughout the country; we only had one price. This was also new. We had only one label. The only change in the label was the name of the wine.

Then we did something else. We found out that an educational campaign had to be started, because otherwise people just wouldn't buy any wine. We needed people to sell wine. Our wine wholesalers

Fromm: just didn't care because a case of whiskey was selling for three or four times as much, and the commission was much higher than on wine. And the people just didn't know wine. It was really a wasteland, America, as far as wine was concerned.

I still was optimistic. I always felt that it would come, because the American people are very flexible, and if something new comes up that is good they take to it. I think what has been done in California in the last fifty years has taken Europe 250 years. The American people, if they have faith in something, the money is available, the people are available, the market is right there, and it is just a question how to sell it. So our problem in the first few years of the firm was to train salesmen of distributors.

Teiser: At that time, didn't Cresta Blanca have some reputation on the East coast?

Fromm: Yes. In a small way.

Teiser: Was it priced below Christian Brothers?

Fromm: I don't think so, but it was not large. Later on it was taken over by Schenley and it became a mass producer.

Teiser: Italian Swiss Colony was on a lower level--

Fromm: On a lower level. Gallo was in the business but was not yet as important at that time. Italian Swiss was very much larger. But most of the wines in those days were shipped from California in tank cars, and if the wine did not ferment on the trip and the tank car did not blow up on the way, it was considered acceptable wine. It was 90 percent sweet wine. It was bottled by the distributor, very often under his own label, and not very frequently under the label of the winery. This was a radical change that took place a few years later. Then wineries promoted their own brands, like Italian Swiss and Gallo and Roma and others.

Teiser: But Christian Brothers was shipping everything in bottles all the time?

Fromm: All bottled at the monastery. We never shipped anything in bulk.

Teiser: Did you consciously adopt the standardized label and the single price, and shipping everything in bottles as a good merchandising plan?

Fromm: Yes.

Teiser: Because it surely was.

Fromm: It was. And what was new was that we had what we called missionary men, a few but as many as the firm could pay for, to help the distributor to train some salesmen so that we would sell some wine. I talked to thousands of salesmen during those years. If we went to a large distributor who had, say 75 or 100 salesmen and three or five were interested in wine, we were already lucky. I think we were the first to adopt uniform label, uniform pricing, and had missionary men that were paid by us and helped the wholesaler in the fullest sense to sell wine, to train him to sell wine. And that really paid off very handsomely for us. We were the first ones to do that. Those steps resulted not from great smartness but from necessity.

Teiser: [laughing] It sounds like a well thought out plan.

Fromm: Well, we had to do it. I always believed that if you are in this business you have to go to the stores; you have to call on the people who buy the wine, not go to the wholesaler and leave it up to him, because if you do generally nothing happens. But if you talk to the people direct and rather extensively, and call on restaurants in the evening— And we worked extremely hard, twelve hour days. But of course we were young and we wanted to make a success.

The World War II Years

Fromm: In the meantime I brought out [of Germany] all my family. We were seven children, and they had children. We were four brothers and three sisters.

Teiser: Your father came too?

Fromm: Yes, but he came very much later, because he didn't think that the Nazis could mean him. He was the last one to leave because he was such a well known and highly regarded man, had a very important title from the German government, "Kommerzein Rat," only given to people who have made an outstanding success and contribution to the country. So he felt that he was safe from the Nazi terror, but unfortunately he was not.

So I brought out all these people, and we are one of the very few large Jewish families that live all in the United States where we have our roots today. Most Jewish families were dispersed all over the world. It is a very fortunate thing for us.

Fromm: When the war broke out, very quickly the shipments from Europe stopped. We were the only California winery that was ready with a certain quantity of good wines--sweet wines and some table wines. We became very succesful during the years, let's say, from 1941 to 1945. Our business increased rapidly. We went into every state of the union.

We didn't do any advertising because there was no money for advertising, and in those days the wine business was a small business basically, but the firm made fairly good money. All of the partners had a good salary. I drew only $25 or $50 a week out of a total yearly salary of $10,000, but the difference was never paid out until many years later. We needed every penny in our developing wine business. In the beginning we had no credit. Nobody knew us and we couldn't get any money from the bank in those days because the firm was too small.

But we did between 1941 and 1945 what would have taken us fifteen years of normal development, so the war situation accelerated our business to a very considerable extent.

American Wine in the Latter 1940s

Fromm: In 1945 there still was no real California wine business or American wine business. There was a poll made by Elmer Roper, who interviewed 5,000 people in America at random to find out what they thought about wine and what they thought the industry could do. The result was, according to the survey, 90 percent of the wine was bought by bums who wanted to buy cheap alcohol; 6 or 7 percent was used by ethnic groups like Italians and others and foreign born people. And maybe 3 percent was purchased by people who knew already a little bit about wine. But as far as table wine was concerned, the business was almost non-existent.

In 1945 and up to 1950-1955, it was very difficult to get any good hotel or restaurant to list any California wine. We made great efforts in this respect, and finally we got some wines listed. I had a lot of connections with the finest stores in the country through my earlier sales of imported wines, and they said, "Well, Alfred, if you insist, we will buy five cases," but then they languished some place in the corner and nothing ever happened. There just was no demand in the finer stores for California wines. And if a hotel or a good restaurant listed one or two California wines, one white and one red, one burgundy and one sauterne, then we felt we were quite successful.

Fromm: The wine business did not exist in the sense we know it today.

However, the large wineries eventually found out if they wanted to make a success and earn enough money to improve the vineyards and the plants and whatever was necessary to conduct a proper wine business, that they had to make some money and that they had to sell their own brands. This is when Gallo, Roma, Italian Swiss, and some of the others started to sell wine under the wineries' own labels. And this is really the start of their brands and marketing.

They sold maybe 90 percent sweet wines, fortified wines, because their type of customer was less used to table wines than our customers were, which were already a step higher. So this business increased, and by 1960-1965 you could see some more optimistic developments. People had some faith that the wine business could be developed in the United States.

Entering the Brandy Market, 1943

Fromm: Our wine business grew consistently, and what was particularly successful for Christian Brothers was that we went into the brandy business in 1940, and by 1943, when we had enough inventory, we were able to come out with a very acceptable American brandy. At that time many people thought it should be called American cognac, which I opposed very much because we have to stand on our own, and if you have to borrow the foreign names, it's not good business in the end.

However, we came out with a clean, good product that was entirely different from French cognacs, which were 99 percent of the brandy category imported into America. We came out with a product that was much lighter, less high in fusel oil and in aldehydes than imported brandies, and was particularly fashioned to mix well with other things like vermouth or whatever mixed drinks were made in those days. Because I could see in my wide travels, in so many restaurants and hotels and bars, that mixed drinks were the big thing, and people rarely drank straight brandy. If they did they bought cognac, but this was not a bar item. It was sold in the finer stores and in the good hotels and restaurants as an after-dinner drink. But I felt very strongly that brandy had a place in the American way of life, particularly in spirits, because it is such a versatile drink and it mixes with almost everything and had to become a bar item.

Teiser: In the development of the brandy at Christian Brothers, who tasted and who decided what?

Fromm: Otto Meyer, who is my brother-in-law--he married my late sister--he was in the brandy business in Germany. His family was in it for generations, too. He knew a great deal about it, and he helped the Brothers tremendously by advising us about the best way to blend a brandy that was different from foreign brandy and that was more eligible for use in mixed drinks. It was a lighter brandy and a more palatable brandy. You know, French cognacs very often have that soapy taste, which is very good for someone who likes it, but the average person in America didn't like it. You see, in those days, don't forget, people were a lot less sophisticated in drinking than they are today.

Teiser: As I remember Christian Brothers brandy when it first came on the market, it was rather sweeter than it is now.

Fromm: Yes. In those days sweetness was one thing that people were looking for. It was not really sweetness in a sense but it was softer and mellower. Then later on when people got more sophisticated and really appreciated fine spirits, the Christian Brothers reduced the level of sweetness considerably.

At that time, when we came out with Christian Brothers brandy, the inventories of French cognacs in America were almost nonexistent, and this became an instant success.

Teiser: How were you making it? Were you using pot stills?

Fromm: We didn't use pot stills for about three years, because we didn't have the pot stills. When I say we I mean the Christian Brothers. We didn't have a pot still in the beginning, but we picked out the brandies very, very carefully from a large pool, and Otto Meyer did really an outstanding job. Our brandy was far superior to anything that was on the market and had an instant success.

Teiser: This was from the prorate pool?

Fromm: Yes. We went throught the whole pool, Otto and I. I think we must have tasted probably six or seven hundred samples of brandy, which was no pleasure. But we picked out those maybe fifteen, twenty lots which were clean, which were nice, and which had some bouquet, and then Otto made some blends. We came out with some brandy that was a highly successful product and far superior in quality to anything which was on the market.

Teiser: Then you started using pot stills?

Fromm: Yes. Then the Brothers saw that pot-still brandy was a heavier, richer brandy. It had to be aged between six to ten years to really attain its full quality. You cannot use it as young as regular brandy.

Teiser: The brandy made in a column still?

Fromm: Yes, the column-still brandy. It's pretty well at the proper age when it's four years old. But by blending in ten to fifteen percent of pot-still brandy, it gave our brandy that quality that didn't exist before.

So we sold to every state in the union. We could have sold more brandy if we had had the inventory.

Teiser: Were you making that at Mont La Salle?

Fromm: No, it was made at Mt. Tivy.

Teiser: Oh, you'd bought Mt. Tivy by then.

Fromm: Yes, the Christian Brothers bought Mt. Tivy from Seagram's. Seagram's owned it at the time. We arranged that the Christian Brothers could buy it at some very favorable terms of payment. On each case that was shipped they paid a few pennies to Seagram's, and after six or seven years the winery was paid off.

Teiser: That put you in a Thompson Seedless area, I assume.

Fromm: Yes.

Teiser: So that you had a good source of supply.

Fromm: Thompson Seedless makes good brandy. It makes a very neutral brandy, and that is desirable, but in order to get more taste and flavor into the brandy, we felt very strongly that we needed some pot-still brandy. That's what got us into the pot stills, because it's much more flavorful and gives you more substance. Because you had blended whiskeys which were very light and didn't have much taste, and vodka came into the market, and to me this was always something that I never could understand why people drink anything that had no taste and no smell and no nothing and was just ordinary alcohol. But it became very successful, and there was a trend to lighter drinks. The heavy bourbon drinkers gradually disappeared and people wanted lighter drinks.

Teiser: Did you use some marketing strategy on that? As I remember, the bottle was a distinctive shape.

Fromm: Yes, it was a nice bottle that we developed and a nice label, but nothing really fancy because we always felt that the money had to be spent on the product and not on the package. So we had a nice, clean, good package, and the package has hardly ever been changed. There was a slight improvement in the label but the package basically is still the same.

Teiser: It's distinctive.

Fromm: Yes, because it's a recognized package and the bottle shape has been copied by many others.

Creating an Advanced Still

Fromm: So the brandy business then became very large, made large revenue for us. And then the Brothers put in a special large continuous still down there, which was entirely different from the stills that existed in California, because the California brandy stills are generally high-proof stills, and we wanted a still with more plates. A much finer product could be developed.

So we went to Seagram's, and Mr. Samuel Bronfman, the one who developed Seagram's and the largest owner of the Seagram's company, became a good friend of ours, and we asked him for some advice, since he was an outstanding expert in spirits. He said to Franz Sichel*, my partner, and to me, "There is only one way you can do it. We will give you our best technical people from Louisville, our still people, who build their own stills, and they will tell you how it should be done." Then we had the right advisers how to build stills, and the Christian Brothers stills today still are the only stills of this kind in the United States.

Teiser: What did this type of still do that other brandy stills don't do?

Fromm: Well, it was a much more sophisticated still than any still existing until today in California. It had a lot of improvements that the whiskey people had worked out over many years for their products, which of course was a big business and a lot of money was spent by them on research. So we were the beneficiary of that and had a brandy still that made cleaner brandy and brandy that did not have

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*For an account of the formation of Fromm and Sichel, successors to Picker-Linz, see pages 22 - 23.

Fromm: as much fusel oil and aldehydes as other brandies produced here. Actually, we were very anxious that the Christian Brothers produce for our sales a brandy that was lighter, softer, and would lend itself particularly for blending in mixed drinks.

Teiser: Does a more sophisticated still "recognize" more sensitively the factors in the brandy as it's being made and separate them out? Is that--?

Fromm: Yes, that's exactly what happens. It gaves us the means to double distill the brandy and clean up any impurities.

So it was not all accidental that the brandy was successful. It took a lot of planning and thinking. But as I have so often said, the marvelous thing in America is that if you talk to the right people they will advise you honestly and give you advice that you couldn't buy for money. That happened to us.

As the brandy business developed further, we had of course to borrow money for inventory at the Bank of America. The Bank of America was very good to us. Very shortly after we started, we got our first credit because we needed to make more brandy and at that time you couldn't get any money in New York on brandy because the banks in New York said, "We will loan on whiskey, but we don't loan on brandy; we don't know it." So we went to the Bank of America; who gave us the first credit, and were very good to us, and I have worked with them since then and never been with any other bank either for the firm or personally.

Agreement with Seagram's, 1954

Fromm: However, the business ran away, and millions were needed to really build the inventory, because at that time we sold already six or seven hundred thousand cases per year of brandy. Your brandy, let's say, is an average five years old, including the pot still, so if you sell five hundred thousand cases you have to make two million cases or two and a half million cases in order to have the inventory at the same level and not even figuring on any increase. So that took an enormous amount of money. So again my partner Franz Sichel and I went to Samuel Bronfman, who was a very good friend of ours. (I have his picture here on the wall; I'll show it to you later) And we said, "What should we do?"

So he said, "Well, Seagram's will buy a 70 percent interest in your firm if you want us to. However, on the condition that Franz Sichel and you remain partners at a sizable share. Because," Mr.

Fromm: Bronfman said to us, "I believe that the most money can be made if you have partners who are financially very much interested in the firm." I said, "Sam, I do not want to work on a salary regardless of what the amount is. I have never worked on a salary. When I was young I worked on commission and I just don't work on a salary." He said, "Well, we want you as a partner for that reason. We don't want a man just on salary."

So Seagram's bought 70 percent. However, the understanding with Seagram's was--and they kept this until last October, 1983, when the firm was sold back to the Christian Brothers--that this was run as a completely autonomous business.

After Franz Sichel died, in 1967, I was president and chief executive officer. I moved in 1941 to California from New York because it was important that a partner of the firm would be here in daily contact with the Christian Brothers, the winery, in California. We moved in '41 to California, and the business developed very well and made money every year except in 1947, when the Christian Brothers and we had a large inventory of wine and then the price controls were dropped, and wine went from $1.20 (sweet wine) to about thirty or forty cents. But that was the only year we lost some money, because we had a large expensive inventory. Otherwise we made some money every year.

Business Principles

Fromm: I have, in those many years that I have been with Picker-Linz as a partner and then with Fromm and Sichel, never have taken a penny out of the firm except my salary and a bonus, because I wanted to increase my stake in the firm, which I have done this way. So this is one of the good things I can say about the German method of running a business.

As I mentioned, we started in the export business of Christian Brothers wine and brandy. We were one of the better known exporters. We shipped to about sixty foreign countries. And the nice thing was that we got a lot of re-orders. See, when you get your first order and you don't get a re-order within six months, then the wine doesn't move. But it worked out quite well. We sold for less money in the export business than we sold in America. We had one price. Nobody could get a different price from us. It was an absolute principle. There was no discount; there was no under-the-table business. I never found it necessary to bribe anyone or to pay off someone. That's just no way to do business.

Fromm: In all these years that I'm in business in America, I found out you don't have to be a mental giant, but you have to have certain principles by which you stick, and this is honesty, and that you know what you are doing and that you know the field in which you are working. And if people trust you--and that's why I like it so much in America--if people trust you, you really have no problems.

Another principle I always worked with is only to deal with the best people, because if you are not so smart yourself and you deal with sharpies, you mostly get the short end. If you deal with honorable and first-class people you do all right. Sometimes people asked me, "Alfred, how come you have so many good distributors in the country?" I said, "Well, for a very simple reason. Because they're people I could talk to, who trusted me, and they're people who would pay us right away." We needed the money right away because in a firm like ours that had developed that fast there was never enough money, because all the money had to go into the inventory.

Teiser: This arrangement with the Christian Brothers group and your group, was there a parallel in the United States at all for such a combination?

Fromm: I don't think so.

Teiser: It was unique?

Fromm: Yes. And as the Brothers often said to me, which pleased me very much, before they made the contract with us they dealt with some people in the East, and they said, "You know Alfred, since we were dealing with a Jewish firm, we never had a better deal. You are honest, you are men of integrity." I said, "Well, it's no more than good business to be honest and have integrity." I have told this to hundreds and hundreds of young men who have worked for us. It was a principle that applied to anyone who worked in the firm. So many of the young people, particularly today, think if you are successful in business that you must have some tricks or that you have some crooked ways of making money. I always tell them, "If ever anyone told you this, they didn't tell you the right thing."

Fromm and Sichel, Successor to Picker-Linz, 1945

Teiser: When did Picker-Linz become Fromm and Sichel?

Fromm: Nineteen forty-five, on January 1. I associated myself as a partner with Franz Sichel, who comes from the wine firm of Sichel-

Fromm: in-Mainz. He was ten years older then I am, a very good wine man, and a very fine person. We were partners for almost twenty-five years and never had one cross word. So it was a very happy relationship. He knew I was more adventurous than he was and more active and younger, so he let me handle things without interference. We talked every Sunday for an hour or an hour and a half on the telephone, discussed everything that was going on, and then we made our decisions right then and there. That worked out very well.

I had already bought out all my other partners. And Franz Sichel joined me in 1945. I needed a large credit in the Bank of America. And just to give you an illustration of how things were in those days, I got a three-year credit at 1 3/4 percent interest per year. Those were different times and it was a very good rate. But one of the top men in the Bank of America who liked me quite a bit, had complete trust in me. He said, "Alfred, the fact that you are so anxious to get the lowest rate of interest--only people who want to pay want the low rate. The ones who don't want to pay, they don't care what we charge them."

Teiser: Do you want to name him?

Fromm: Fred Ferroggiaro. He was an executive vice-president of the Bank of America and chairman of the finance committee. A really old-style banker.

Instead of three years, after one and a half years I was able to pay off my loan at the bank. That was one of the happy days of my life. I had a lot of deferred salary coming that I hadn't drawn, so I drew that, and the taxes were low in those days. So I paid off the bank. Franz Sichel borrowed, too, in the Bank of America, and Seagram's had to deduce that I didn't need any help from them. They knew me in the bank and I didn't need any guarantees or anything. But they didn't know Franz Sichel, so he borrowed in the bank, too, with Seagram's backing, and that was paid off a little later. It was always a very excellent relationship of trust that we had with the Bank of America.

In those days the bank was a lot smaller, and there was much more of a personal relationship. I mean, I had many good friends--most of the presidents of the Bank of America have been personal friends of mine because they liked to talk to a small businessman, too, get his ideas and suggestions.

Sam Armacost, the new president of the bank, I know him well. He's a personal friend. But if you want something, if you go to Sam Armacost you are being turned over to someone else, because the

Fromm: man has so many responsibilities. It's not the same as it was forty years ago.

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Fromm: In 1950 Seagram's became a partner in Fromm and Sichel. The partnership consisted 70 percent of Seagram's and 30 percent was owned by Franz Sichel and myself.

As I told you, we were completely autonomous. Seagram's was always available when we wanted advice, but we never came to them and said, "This is a problem and that's a problem." We said, "Here, this is the problem; that's what we expect to do. Do you have a better solution?" They always said, "Go ahead and do what you described."

You know, as I so often say, the good Lord had his hand over us. That you have to work hard, that you have to be honorable, have integrity, that you know your business--that's only 50 percent. But the other 50 percent is being there at the right time, getting together with the right people. And some people say that's good luck, that's good fortune; I say it was a good hand that was over us. In all those years. And I'm very grateful for that.

Association with Paul Masson

President, 1944-1955

Teiser: There was quite an overlap, was there not, with your interest in Paul Masson?

Fromm: Yes. Paul Masson was owned by Seagram's. They didn't do anything with it. It was very small. They bought it from Martin Ray. It was a premium winery, had some very, very good wines there. But they had no sales organization. One day the head of Seagram's called Franz Sichel and me and said, "We would like you to take it off our hands." We said, "We'll be glad to do it, but we will pay you only as we sell the inventory, because we cannot afford to invest additional money and we don't want to borrow any more money." They said, "Fine, do that."

Then I became president of Paul Masson, and I spent quite some time down there. At that time my father was already here, and he tasted every barrel of wine, and he was really an outstanding

Fromm: taster. And we put a small quantity of wine into the market at that time at, I think, $36 a case, which was an unheard of price. They had some beautiful wines there. That business developed very quickly. The purchase price to Seagram's was paid off within two years.

Teiser: You were president from '44 to '55.

Fromm: Yes. I ran the business in addition to our business here for Christian Brothers, and we did very well with it, but there was a limit how far we could grow because the inventory did not exist, and the winery up in the hills in Saratoga was very, very small. So we did a few things up there, like Music in the Vineyards, started by my late brother Norman. You have heard about Music in the Vineyards? It's already in its twentieth year at Paul Masson. Open-air concerts. We founded that, and it has been done now by other wineries, and the nice thing is if you do something right, other people will do it, too. But it always takes someone to stick his neck out and try to do it.

So we developed this firm, and then we could see there was quite a chance in Paul Masson as a premium winery, as they were only in the table wine business at that time. Otto Meyer, who was with me in the firm, was asked to take over management of Paul Masson and run it, and he became president and ran it quite successfully.

Teiser: Let me take you back if I may. As I remember, at the time that you took it over, the winery wasn't very much and it had little vineyard land. Is that right?

Fromm: It had a few hundred acres of top-grade vineyards up on the hill, but the production was extremely small. We replanted quite a few vineyards, and then in the early 1960s we bought a lot of new vineyard land down near Salinas because there just was no land available in Santa Clara County, as you know, with the development of the whole Silicon Valley, at a price where you could afford to have a vineyard. So we went down there and we planted about 1500 acres.

Teiser: In the meantime, did you have others making wine for you?

Fromm: Yes. We got some wines from Mirassou and from some other people down there. They made it under contract for us. Then we built the winery in Saratoga. That was at that time quite an undertaking. And the champagne business was developed, the wine business was developed. And then in Soledad another winery and crushing plant was built.

Fromm: When Otto went to Paul Masson, there was some sort of jealously between the Christian Brothers and Paul Masson, even though we ran it separately and never had any difficulty in our mind to separate those two and do the right thing for both. But the Brothers felt maybe that I would spend more time on it, so we split it off and made it a completely separate operation.

Teiser: For both of them.

Fromm: --by Picker-Linz first, and then by Fromm and Sichel. So we split it up and they had their own organization.

Teiser: Masson was no longer distributed by your firm?

Fromm: No. They built their own organization and became quite big in the meantime. They went more and more into production of large quantities of wine. They now have another plant in the San Joaquin Valley. But at that time when Otto and I were in charge, we really ran it as a premium wine business, as a top-quality producer.

Planting Vineyards in the Salinas Valley

Teiser: When you bought the acreage in the Salinas Valley, was that a big decision? Were you part of that decision?

Fromm: Yes. It was a decision that gave me many sleepless nights because we didn't know how well a vineyard would do. We were the first ones to do that. And after that Mirassou came in, and after that Wente came in. But we were the pioneers. We were the first ones. Masson bought acreage in 1960, Mirassou in 1961, and in 1962 their first commercial plantings were made.

What we found out later was that the white grapes down there were absolutely excellent but the red grapes needed something else. Red grapes there are not as good as the grapes in Napa or Sonoma. We planted only the best varietal grapes. Then later on the red grapes were mostly grafted over to white grapes like Johannisberg Riesling and Chardonnays and Semillon and Sauvignon blanc.

Teiser: You planted the vines on their own roots?

Fromm: No, they were all grafted on American rootstock.

Teiser: Originally?

Fromm: Yes. Even so, it's no phylloxera yet down there but it's coming

too.

Teiser: Then the Masson vineyards there won't be affected?

Fromm: Yes, they can still be affected; even a grafted vineyard can be affected to some extent by phylloxera in a small way. But it's a danger, you know--if you have pests in a certain territory you never know how far it can go. Some of the chemicals that we used before in spraying the vineyards are outlawed and the new ones are less effective today, so we were very, very careful on that.

Teiser: Did you work with the university on various plantings for Paul Masson?

Fromm: Every vineyard has been plotted and planned by UC Davis. They were absolutley marvelous. They sent their groups down there; they made the surveys and they made us plots of the various soil conditions and all that, and we followed strictly their advice, and it turned out very well. They are the best people in the world. I have been around in my life, and I really can say that.

Teiser: Who there did you work with mainly?

Fromm: There are quite a few people, mainly, Dr. [A.J.] Winkler. We also talked a great deal to Dr. [Maynard A.] Amerine, and to Dr. [Emil] Mrak. Dr. Winkler was really in charge at that time. He sent students down, and it was a good experience for them, and it helped us and hardly cost us anything. It's a marvelous service. And as I have often said, the California wine industry would not be where it is today if it wasn't for Davis, because they are really the tops in wine-making techniques and all that. They developed a combination of modern American technology and European traditions, which is what makes a good mixture.

Teiser: In the rehabilitation of both Christian Brothers and Paul Masson, did you draw on your knowledge of European wineries to select equipment for these wineries?

Fromm: We advised the Brothers, we helped the Brothers to get the best equipment. We gave them the names and we put them in touch with the various people. But in the meantine, the Brothers had developed their own staff of really good people, so that was not so much necessary any more. But we always consulted with each other and worked very closely together. Unfortunately, Brother John died very early, and there were a few successors who were not as well versed in the wine business as Brother John was, who really grew up with it, the same as I.

Teiser: Was champagne an important product for Paul Masson all along?

Fromm: Yes, it was. Champagne was the main product of Paul Masson, but with the chances that we all saw in the wine business, we felt that the wine business had to be developed and came very fast, and that made it necessary then to build the new plant and to put the vineyards in. And then Masson had a lot of contracts with other vineyardists down in Monterey County, so the grapes were then available. They were the first ones to put in a large vineyard, and as I told you, then Mirassou and Wente followed afterwards. There are good grapes from there.

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Association With the Christian Brothers Continued

Selling Christian Brothers Wines

Teiser: One thing that you said yesterday that I was thinking about--you said that when you started working with the Christian Brothers, you decided that it was necessary to educate Americans about wine drinking. How did you undertake that?

Fromm: Well, the first thing was that we had what we called missionary men that called on our wholesalers and distributors and tried to educate the salesmen so that they, in turn, would talk to the retailers. In addition to that, we talked to a lot of wine writers. There were not too many in those days, and they were all new in the business and I was able to give them some helpful information. It was amazing how much good will I found as far as education of wine is concerned, because it's a very pleasant subject.

Teiser: Another thing occurred to me: When you were tasting with the Christian Brothers, were you trying to create a wine that was not European, and not like previous California wines? What was your aim?

Fromm: Our aim in tasting all the wines was to blend together the wines which were most suitable for this purpose because the Christian Brothers, and in particular, Brother John, Brother Timothy and I, felt that we should come out with a product that was on a quality level but at the same time, would appeal to the American taste. And that meant, among the red wines that the wine should not have excess tannin, that the wine had a certain softness to it. As you know, particularly for a neophyte in drinking wine, the scale of taste generally goes from sweet to dry. As I said to you

Gathered for a 1967 meeting in Montreal, *left to right:* Brother Gregory of Mont La Salle; Samuel Bronfman, head of Seagrams; Brother Charles Henry, first American Superior General of the Christian Brothers; Alfred Fromm.

At the Christian Brothers' Greystone winery, late 1970s, *left to right:* Brother Gregory, Alfred Fromm, unidentified person, Brother Timothy, Walter Neihoff of Botsford Ketchum

Fromm: yesterday, America was really a wasteland in those days as far as wine is concerned. We had to come out with something that would appeal to the consumer but at the same time was on a very much higher quality level then the California wines that were in the market and were mostly shipped in tank cars from California and were bottled and sold at very low prices.

The Vie-Del Company

Teiser: I don't know where it fits in, but I want to ask you about the Vie-Del Company. Was it connected with either Christian Brothers or Paul Masson?

Fromm: No, it was not. However, Vie-Del supplied blending sherry to Seagram's, and we were talking to Jim Riddell and Mike Nury, who at that time were running the Vie-Del Company. It was a very small firm at that time, and we built, later on, brandy warehouses at Vie-Del to store the brandy produced by the Christian Brothers. Under our contract with the Christian Brothers only brandy produced by the Christian Brothers could be sold under the Christian Brothers label. This was in effect in all those years.

So we had our brandy warehouses there, and Vie-Del supplied to Seagram's blending sherry, and we became very friendly. It took considerably more money than Vie-Del at that time had of their own to build the brandy warehouses, and their credit with the banks was not very well established. So Fromm and Sichel purchased the majority of the Vie-Del shares. We also got an option on the balance of the Vie-Del shares, and after the death of Mr. [James] Riddell all his shares would have to be purchased by us. So Mr. Riddell knew that there was a market for his share in the business. He did die some years later [in 1973]. And Mr. Nury acquired from us some of the shares at a very advantageous payment schedule, because he is an extremely capable man and has made a great success of the Vie-Del Company. I was a partner in the Vie-Del Company, too, but when I sold my shares to Seagram's in August of 1983, they acquired Fromm and Sichel's shares in Vie-Del, too, and own something like 87 percent of the Vie-Del Company, and Mike Nury owns roughly 13 percent.

St. Regis Vineyards

Teiser: I think I read that in 1939 you bought some vineyard land in California, maybe it was a small amount, and I think I noticed that from time to time you had invested in other vineyard land. Is that correct?

Fromm: No, our firm did not invest in vineyard land as early as that, but we did later on. It must have been about 1975 that we founded the firm St. Regis Vineyards, that was a subsidiary of Fromm and Sichel, that acquired 350 acres of first-class vineyard land in Napa Valley in order to produce additional top varietal grapes that the Christian Brothers needed. The Christian Brothers did not want to put their money in or were not able to put their money in for those additional vineyards so we financed it, and then as the vineyards produced grapes, we turned the grapes over to the Christian Brothers.

St. Regis Vineyards still has this land under long-term leases. It's right on the highway and near St. Helena and then further up in the hills.

Growth of the Christian Brothers

Teiser: Over the years, then, since you have known and worked with Christian Brothers, it's really developed considerably, has it not?

Fromm: Yes, it has developed to one of the leading wineries in the premium business. It's not a boutique winery, it's a medium-sized winery and sales were something like a million and a half cases of brandy and between a million and a half and two million cases of wine. So it's not a small winery.

Teiser: And it's grown physically, also?

Fromm: Yes, very much so. The Christian Brothers built additional facilities in the Napa Valley and they purchased, quite a few years ago, the Greystone Cellars in Napa Valley. They purchased the Bisceglia winery in Fresno. They built a big warehouse near St. Helena. They put in additional vineyards of their own because it was needed. They have invested quite some money in their facilities, and we generally helped them in doing it. The Brothers own approximately 1400 acres in Napa Valley.

Teiser: I read about Greystone being possibly not earthquake-proof.

Fromm: Yes. Well, they will make a lot of seismic investigations now to find out. That building looks like a fortress, and it has big stone walls and all that, but it is earthquake country there, and there is a certain danger, and it is such a popular place for visitors to visit. I know there are sometimes a few hundred people there, and God forbid you had something collapse. It could be really catastrophic. Greystone was built in 1889, and of course in those days one did not know how one could build better earthquake-proof buildings. It is a beautiful place and a great tourist attraction.

Teiser: The Christian Brothers champagne cellars are on the southern edge of St. Helena--

Fromm: Yes.

Teiser: Can you say something about that?

Fromm: Well, we asked the Brothers to produce champagne, and then they put in the Charmat process because in many tastings we found out that we could make a more even-bodied champagne and stabilize the quality. It's made in small tanks and they really have put out a product that is very well accepted by the trade and by the consumer because it is a very good champagne. It was made at Greystone but now, of course, they have to relocate this and put it where they have the big warehouse and storage capacity in St. Helena.

Teiser: They were not making the methode champenoise champagne at Greystone?

Fromm: No, it was all Charmat process champagne. Yes. They were making it there at Greystone at first, and it was well aged there on the upper floor where the champagne facilities were, and there was a lot of room. We put the bottles aside for aging, and after some time it was a really good product.

Teiser: The South St. Helena Charmat process facility itself was quite advanced, was it not, when they built it later?

Fromm: Yes. Brother Timothy and some of his assistants had been to France and to Germany and talked to a lot of people. And then we all decided that the Charmat process for Christian Brothers would be a better process than a bottle-fermented methode champenoise because, as I said, we would have a more even quality product.

The California Brandy Business

Teiser: Have Christian Brothers' sales increased or have they hit a plateau?

Fromm: Well, in the last few years, brandy sales were rather flat. They increased every year by maybe thirty or fifty thousand cases and there was a certain plateau. The Brandy Advisory Board, which unfortunately is being discontinued, was able to promote brandy in a way that a private firm could not do legally. On the other hand, the brandy business is one of the businesses in hard liquor that is more stable and has not receded; in fact the total consumption of brandy has increased.

Teiser: The Brandy Advisory Board was started in 1972--

Fromm: Yes. At that time the president of our firm, Jack Welsch, was instrumental in establishing the Brandy Advisory Board. And all the brandy producers were members of it, and there was a certain assessment on each gallon of brandy produced.

Teiser: It was a California state marketing organization?

Fromm: Marketing order, yes, it was.

Teiser: Has it accomplished what it set out to do?

Fromm: We think it has, yes.

Teiser: Why is it being let go now, then?

Fromm: Well, there is a very large factor--the Gallos. And apparently Mr. [Ernest] Gallo felt that if he spends the money on production that he supplies to the Advisory Board on assessment, he could get more for his money. However, now they're changing because, for the first time, Gallo seems to be willing to cooperate with the vintners, with the producers, to have a joint order for wine. This is quite a change in his attitude. The Gallos are farsighted people.

Teiser: The rise of brandy sales by Gallo, which has been overtaking Christian Brothers--

Fromm: It has overtaken to a very small extent, and right now sales of Gallo and Christian Brothers are about equal, but Gallo brandy is selling for a much lower price than Christian Brothers in general, and they give very large discounts. They are a privately held firm and I think a very profitable firm, and they can well

Fromm: afford to do that. They have the enormous scale of size. Gallo is the lowest-cost producer of any winery in the United States. So they spend considerable money, but generally their brandy sells for less than Christian Brothers'. They do not use any pot-still brandy in their blend. That's a good part of it, so we think it will always be neck and neck, the competition between Gallo and Christian Brothers.

Teiser: The implication in Gallo's effort is that brandy can have a larger market than it has. Do you believe that?

Fromm: Yes, I definitely believe that.

Teiser: Where would it come from?

Fromm: Well, brandy has a lot of versatility and can be used in very many ways. We are getting away more and more from trying to sell to the public brandy in a snifter because there is a different way of using brandy. Brandy is a very nice and soft drink. It is a very agreeable drink. It is made from grapes, so it has all the advantages in the public eye. A very good brandy is really a very good drink. As people get away more and more from harsher whiskeys, the brandy business has increased and will further increase the same as the business in cordials has tremendously increased in the United States--imported cordials and American produced cordials. And they're being consumed mostly by the younger people.

Teiser: Then the brandy market could expand at the expense of whiskey or vodka or--

Fromm: Yes, well, the whiskey business is receding and I think brandy can take some of it. Brandy is only a small part, about 4 1/2 to 5 percent of the consumption of spirits. We feel that progress will be slow but there will be progress every year and it is quite possible that brandy will ultimately have maybe a market share of 8 to 10 percent of the spirit consumption.

Teiser: One of the brandy mysteries, I believe, is its heavy sale in Wisconsin.

Fromm: The consumption of brandy in Wisconsin was for many years much larger than the consumption of whiskey, and nobody has found out the real reasons. Of course, there are a lot of European families there with people of European origins--Germany, in particular--who really didn't know any whiskeys, but brandy was always considered a medicine and very healthy and a good drink. But nobody has explained why the people in Wisconsin just drink brandy so much. They drink a shot of brandy with a glass of beer. A strange way for us to think of it, but that's what happens.

Fromm: Minnesota is a large market and we have done there very considerable business. However, in Wisconsin the brandy business was strictly a price-cutting business and, while we were there for many years, we did not choose to give the brandy away and lose money on it. So a lot of cheap brandy was sold.

Teiser: Are there imported brandies that are competitive with California brandies?

Fromm: Well, certainly not the cognacs that sell for at least two and two and a half times as much, but the so-called French brandies which are not cognacs which are made in other parts of France from low-priced wines. These grapes that are used in the cognac districts are very expensive. There is a very limited production. So, yes, there are some there to give us competition. Low-price brandies particularly from France. And every wine-producing country in the world produces brandy, too.

Teiser: Can you make brandy out of any old wine?

Fromm: Well, you can, but you can not make good brandy out of poor wine. The wine has to be clean, it has to be fresh and has to be made from the right kind of grapes, otherwise you have no flavor. And if you have wine that is half-spoiled and you have so much fusel oil in it, it becomes almost like gasoline; it's undrinkable.

Styles of Brandy

Fromm: Actually, when the Christian Brothers went into the brandy business, there was hardly any brandy business in America. I think we were really the ones who put brandy on the map. There was very little brandy sold here.

Teiser: The California Wine Association had A.R. Morrow brandy.

Fromm: Yes, that was a very heavy brandy and there were some people who liked it, but it was not really for the American taste. I think Christian Brothers was the first one to find out what the American people would like to drink, and then we tried to fashion a good product and told the Brothers what we needed, and had a lot of tasting on that and checked it continously, and decided that pot-still brandy as I mentioned before was a necessary ingredient that would give it quality.

Teiser: Just now there is at least one winery making pot-still brandy--Schramsberg Vineyard, in a joint venture.

Fromm: Yes, yes, that's together with Remy Martin who is from France. But pot-still brandy needs a lot more aging than continuous-still brandy. It will probably take quite some time before it will be on the market. All of the specialties can only be helpful to the brandy business. I always have been of the opinion that good new products--a product that has a special interest that can be produced in small quantities--can only help the industry. It's, you know, like going into a store to buy a dress. You want to look maybe at ten dresses before you buy. That's how most women do. So you have a certain variety that adds some interest to the search.

Teiser: Is there a "boutique" brandy industry starting?

Fromm: If there is there a boutique brandy, I think Christian Brothers had it by putting out X O Brandy. X O [Rare Reserve] had 50 percent pot-still brandy and 50 percent continuous still brandy and was made from the oldest reserves of the Brothers. The Brothers today have by far the largest inventory of old brandy and the largest inventory of brandy altogether in the United States.

Teiser: They served it at your testimonial dinner, did they not?

Fromm: Yes, yes they did. I think that X O Brandy is something that can well compete with good French Cognacs.

Teiser: I would think there would be a temptation for the same kind of people who have a lot of money and don't mind losing it and want to make fine wine--to get into experimenting with pot-still brandy.

Fromm: The brandy business is a very capital-intensive business. It takes a lot of money to do that. As an example, if you sell a thousand cases of brandy, the pot-still brandy would have to be six or eight years old; you would have to produce each year enough for six or eight thousand cases plus whatever you expect your sales increases will be. So it takes a tremendous amount of money. It was the fact that it takes so much money that led us to go to Seagram's and find a very secure large financial basis where there was no limit to how far we could extend the business.

Teiser: I remember having been in the experimental brandy distillery at UC Davis. Have their studies contributed to the industry?

Fromm: Yes, Dr. [James F.] Guymon did a very creditable job. I would certainly say that without the people who work in Davis, the wine industry and the brandy industry in California would not be what it is today. They have a great share, they can take a large share of credit for that.

Teiser: I am told by industry members that the Data Annual summarizing each year's California wine and brandy statistics, was of great value to everyone. Would you tell about how Fromm and Sichel happened to undertake the job of compiling and publishing it?

Fromm: We felt that as a public service we should give pertinent information to the American wine writers, trade associations, and others interested in this material that was not available otherwise to them in such a comprehensive form. We felt that at the same time it would build some good will for our firm.

Sale of Fromm and Sichel to The Christian Brothers, 1983

Teiser: To come back to recent events, Fromm and Sichel continued until just this last year?

Fromm: Fromm and Sichel was sold to the Christian Brothers on October 1, 1983.

Teiser: What part of the holdings of Fromm and Sichel went to the Christian Brothers?

Fromm: Only those holdings that they needed to run the sales business of their products.

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Teiser: You said that the reason for the sale--

Fromm: The issue was that the Christian Brothers were very anxious to combine marketing and production--to synchronize that because this became sometimes a problem. And it had something to do, too, with my retirement, as I was running the firm for so many years. So we turned over a lot of the brandy inventories--the inventories were all made by the Christian Brothers, but we paid for them at time of production because the Christian Brothers couldn't afford to keep brandy inventories of something like $80 million to $90 million.

So we turned over to the Brothers the amount of brandy that they needed for their sales. They asked if they could continue with the name of Fromm and Sichel because we have a respected name throughout the country, which we agreed to. And they took some of our top people, including our general sales manager, who was with us for many years, Al [Allen] Nirenstein, and so we have helped them as much as we can and we will continue to help because we want to see them succeed.

Fromm: I have a personal reason in that, too, I was for 47 years connected with the Christian Brothers, and the firm Fromm and Sichel has my name in it. I was a founder of Fromm and Sichel, and the best part of my business life I spent with the Christian Brothers, so I have a very warm feeling for the Brothers in my heart and I help them whenever possible.

Teiser: Do you still work a little with them, then?

Fromm: Well, they ask me sometimes about certain things, and they know that if there's any problem coming up where I can be of help, that I will be glad to do it and so will the Seagram's company.

Teiser: What is the organization known as the Brandy Association of California with which you continue to be associated as chairman of the board?

Fromm: It was until the sale of Fromm and Sichel to the Christian Brothers a subsidiary 100 percent owned by us. Over the years Brandy Association sold brandy produced by Vie-Del to other brandy marketers. After the sale of Fromm and Sichel, substantial assets, including our office building, not sold to the Christian Brothers were transferred to Brandy Associates, now a Division of Joseph E. Seagram and Sons, New York, and 100 percent owned by them. They have taken over certain pension matters and other obligations of Fromm and Sichel.

Key Men at Christian Brothers

Teiser: Have you tasted for them all these years?

Fromm: Yes, we have done a lot of tasting. That was, I think, maybe one of my main contributions that I could make in the production--in tasting--because it was with Brother Timothy and in former years, Brother John. Brother John was a dynamic guy and he died, unfortunately, much too young and I would say, Brother John and I really put the business on the map. It was a very close cooperation and, as I think I mentioned, in the beginning neither the Brothers nor we had any money to speak of, so it was necessaary to do a lot of things together and fortunately, it did work out well for both parties.

Teiser: Did the two of you sort of teach Brother Timothy?

Fromm: Well, Brother John probably did to a large extent, but Brother Timothy has a very good palate. And Brother Timothy is very good in public relations. I mean his whole appearance. And he's a very kind man and a very knowledgeable man. He has been very helpful in the development of the business, and we have asked Brother Timothy very often to call on certain customers, together with some of our sales force, which has always been successful.

Teiser: Are there others among the Brothers who have become experts?

Fromm: Well, there are some and then, of course, they have some lay people who run the wineries and their production. There was John Hoffman who was in charge of production of table wines in Napa, and he is a brother of the late Brother John. And then down in Mt. Tivy winery in the San Joaquin Valley, there was Herman Archinal--a very capable man who worked very closely with Brother John. Those people are not there any more. They have retired now. There are new people now there. They were there for many years; you know, we all have gotten a little bit older in the last 47 years.

Teiser: But they haven't been able to bring up any Brothers as experts?

Fromm: Well, I always told them how important this was, and they have some people, but they are not as conversant with all the new production techniques that are required today. So they hired some very good lay people.

The Wine Museum of San Francisco, 1974-1984

Teiser: There were other assets of Fromm and Sichel that were disposed of?

Fromm: They were not disposed of to the Christian Brothers.

This building here, that was owned by Fromm and Sichel, was sold recently and this is one of the reasons why the Wine Museum has to be dissolved, because it's part of this building. I built this building twelve years ago as headquarters for Fromm and Sichel, but since I sold my stock 100 percent to Seagram's, Seagram's actually, now is the owner of this building. It's held by Fromm and Sichel, but Fromm and Sichel is owned 100 percent by Seagram's.

Teiser: So it was really Seagram's, through Fromm and Sichel, who made the sale to the Christian Brothers--is that right?

The Wine Museum of San Francisco, incorporating The Christian Brothers Collection, was opened in 1974.
Above, Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Fromm at the opening reception, with a grape vine sculpture by J. B. Blunk commissioned for the museum.
Below, the Thomas Jefferson Gallery.

Fromm: That's correct.

Teiser: But Seagram's held on to this building?

Fromm: Yes.

Teiser: There's a picture of you and several other men standing on a board in what looks like London after the blitz, with glasses of champagne. And it's the site just before construction started. It was clearly a very happy occasion.

Fromm: Well, you know, this building site was really a slum, with some miserable schlock stores. But we bought this lot because it has such a marvelous location particularly for the museum, you know--the end of the cable car line. And there's a tremendous amount of visitors here in this neighborhood, so we were very anxious to get the lot. It was very expensive in those days, but today it's probably worse--three times as much.

Teiser: Who designed the building?

Fromm: Worley Wong, architect in San Francisco.

Teiser: You must have worked very closely with him, did you?

Fromm: Yes, we did, yes.

Teiser: Was the wine museum conceived as part of it originally?

Fromm: As soon as we built the building we created space for the wine museum and built an extra addition for it.

Teiser: The wine museum--may I ask you about it?

Fromm: Well, I always felt that a wine museum that would deal exclusively with wine in the arts would be a great asset to our industry. In fact, the Wine Museum of San Francisco is the only museum in the United States that deals exclusively with wine and the arts. We don't show any old barrels or any big wine presses or things like that, but we really deal with wine in the arts. My late brother, Norman, and I and my wife, we collected for about forty-five years and got some marvelous artworks which today are almost unobtainable. Even if today, say, you want to spend a few million dollars, you couldn't get those collections together because the stuff just isn't available or you can buy it at some auctions--one thing here and one thing there--but it takes many years to get a collection together.

On a rainy day in 1971 a group celebrated the groundbreaking for the Fromm and Sichel building on Bay Street.

Teiser: Did you buy through agents in Europe, or--

Fromm: Well, we bought through agents in Europe and people we know that had connections. We bought things here, and I had a very large collection of wine books, about a thousand wine books, some of them very, very rare and old, going back to almost the earliest type of printing, in Latin and in Italian. English wine books are, of course, a much later date. And I own this collection and it will end up at the new Seagram museum in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, which was just built and will open very shortly. It is a very large museum for wines and spirits. Most of our collections will go there.

Teiser: I'm so sorry San Francisco is losing all that.

Fromm: Yes. It was really a labor of love. It was a special project of mine, but that's the way those things go, in very large companies decisions are being made that are very difficult to change and the very top management of Seagram's just didn't want to overrule them. They felt the Wine Museum wouldn't produce any revenue. Well, that's of course the wrong attitude. You know, man doesn't live by bread alone.

We had in the museum every year between 100,000 and 125,000 visitors. We were very choosy--we never accepted any bus tours. We could have had 500,000 people a year if we had bus tours, but we didn't want it because a museum should be a place where you can leisurely browse around and really enjoy what we have, and I think it has created a lot of good will not only for Christian Brothers but for the whole industry. And I am very industry-minded. I always felt that what's good for the industry is good for us too.

Teiser: Could you speak a little of Mr. Ernest Mittelberger's part in the museum?

Fromm: Yes. Well, when we opened the museum, Ernie Mittleberger, who had worked as Public Relations Director of Paul Masson and who had worked with me for many years before in New York when our firm was in New York--the old Picker-Linz Company--he was there with us, and I knew that Ernie was always very much interested in art. He was a real student--typical German student, you know; they were very, very thorough. He had to know. So when we opened here, I said, "Ernie, I want you to take that over."

First he said to me, "Well, I don't know if I could do it, if I'm qualified."

I said, "Ernie, you are qualified. You just find out what you have to do." And within a couple of years, it was amazing how well

Above, Ernest Mittelberger, director of the Wine Museum of San Francisco, and Alfred Fromm examine a wine jar of King Solomon's time that was given to the museum by Teddy Kollek, mayor of Jerusalem.
Below, at a reception given at the museum, *left to right,* Philip Hiaring, publisher of Wines and Vines; Baron Philippe de Rothschild, guest of honor; Alfred Fromm.

things ran and how people came to him for information as he was very sound in what he was doing. Ernie and I, we planned then

Fromm: together those various exhibits in the museum which were very well received. We were very anxious that the museum not be used for propaganda and not for trying to sell something. We never sold anything in the museum. Yes, you could buy a few postcards for twenty cents or the book that Ernie wrote as co-author.

Teiser: I have a copy of it, In Celebration of Wine and Life by Richard B. Lamb and Mr. Mittelberger.

Fromm: You probably saw the foreward that I wrote.

Teiser: Yes. I'm about to ask you to autograph it.

There was also a second book, wasn't there, on art?

Fromm: Yes, there have been quite a few books. Some odd publishers came to us and wanted to reproduce a number of our artworks and they did, and they were always very well received, but we never in any way whatsoever promoted any sales of them because I felt this was the wrong way for a museum. A museum should be a public place and a place for the good of the public, and ultimately you get some benefits out of it, too.

Teiser: What will happen to the glass collection?

Fromm: The glass collection belongs to the Franz W. Sichel Foundation. Franz Sichel, as I mentioned, I think, to you yesterday, was my partner for almost twenty-five years. After I started to collect wine antiques, I finally induced Franz that he should do something too (this goes back now about thirty years) and he started to get interested in wine glasses and he had some very excellent advisers, true experts, because those things you have to know. He got a fabulous collection together and this was exhibited in our office, of course. Not all the glasses could be. That was one of the reasons we wanted to show them in the wine museum. Unfortunately, when we opened the museum years ago, Franz was not alive anymore, and then I was appointed president of the Franz Sichel Foundation, and we got the glasses here on loan from the Franz Sichel Foundation. They own the glasses. We didn't want to buy them. That would have been a very sizable investment. His collection is worth, I don't know, probably something between $600,000 and a million dollars. But we were very happy to see the exhibit that carries Franz's name, and it will go to the De Young Museum In Golden Gate Park here for permanent display.

Industry Organizations

Teiser: I wanted to ask you about the Wine Institute. Did you feel that it did a good job educating the consumer, a matter you spoke of yesterday?

Fromm: They did a good job while they had the means. Then they had to stop it, because the [Wine Advisory Board] assessments were discontinued, but the Wine Institute has many other important functions. It looks out for the industry, and almost everybody in the wine industry is a member of the Wine Institute. It takes care of all the legal matters. As you know, every state has a different law for alcoholic beverages, so we are not in that respect in the United States. And there is a federal law. There are continuous changes, continuous difficulties by smaller states that produce a little wine that want to enact preferences and tax wines higher from California.

You wouldn't think such things would exist in the United States, but under the change in the Constitution the states really have the first right--it follows in many ways the guidelines of the federal law. And then we have of course those state monopolies, where only the state can sell wine and liquor, and they have not been very helpful to the wine industry. It's a bureaucratic system, and it's been not good for the consumer by its limited choice of offerings.

Teiser: Do the same or similar regulations apply to brandy?

Fromm: Yes. Whatever alcoholic beverages there are.

Teiser: I believe you served on a committee of the Wine Institue.

Fromm: Yes, I did serve on several committees years ago, but I never wanted to be a director of the Wine Institute because actually it is a producers' organization. Jack Welsch and some other people from our organization were directors. I felt I had more impact in talking through them.

John De Luca [president of the Wine Institute] is an absolutely outstanding man. It is a very difficult job to balance the various forces. You know, after all, Gallo is the largest contributor to the Wine Institute.

Teiser: Has James McManus of the Brandy Advisory Board been a help to the brandy industry?

Fromm: Yes, he has. They were able to do certain advertising and tastings that under federal law we could not do. It has been a useful organization.

Teiser: Is there now going to be a voluntary brandy organization to follow the Brandy Advisory Board?

Fromm: We don't know yet. There probably will.

Teiser: Is there something more I have not thought of to ask you?

Fromm: Well, you know what the set-up is at the Christian Brothers. The Mont La Salle Vineyards is owned by the De La Salle Institute. The Mont La Salle Vineyards is a taxpaying organization, and the De La Salle Institute is not. The money that the Brothers are making is being used for the maintenance of several of the schools, and this has been successful enough so that the Provincial has had enough money out of the business so that they never had to close down any of the schools. They are good educators, and any good school is good, regardless of what faith you are. In the end if it's taught with the right principles it only can do some good.

As you probably know, I have been a regent of St. Mary's College for many years and was awarded an honorary degree in 1971. My wife and I founded the Fromm Institute for Lifelong Learning at the University of San Francisco ten years ago. Both my wife and I got an honorary degree, Doctor of Public Service, for the formation and funding of the Fromm Institute, because it was something new and needed. It has become the most successful institute of its kind in the United States. We educate retired people during the daytime at an advanced university level in an age group from fifty to nintey years. Students are taught exclusively by prominent retired professors, chosen from the University of California, Stanford University, San Francisco State University, University of San Francisco, and others.

Transcribers: Sam Middlebrooks and Lindy Berman
Final Typist: Ernest Galvan

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please print or write clearly)

Your full name ALFRED FROMM

Date of birth 2-23-1905 Place of birth Kitzingen/MAIN (Bavaria)

Father's full name MAX FROMM

Birthplace GROSSLANGHEIM (Bavaria)

Occupation OWNER OF N. FROMM, VINTERS x Shippers Kitzingen

Mother's full name MATHILDE (BORN MAIER) FROMM

Birthplace FISCHACH (Bavaria)

Occupation Housewife

Where did you grow up ? Kitzingen

Present community San Francisco, Cal.

Education MIDDLE HIGH School

Occupation(s) WINE DISTRIBUTING FIRM Chief Executive

Special interests or activities Education for retired people, FOUNDER WINE Museum of S.F., President Jewish Community Museum, SF., Director S.F. Opera, Trustee Conservatory of Music, SF, Regent ST. Mary's College, Moraga, Director of many Charitable organizations

FROMM, ALFRED, distbg. co. exec.; b. Kitzingen, Germany, Feb. 23, 1905; s. Max and Mathilda (Maier) F.; student Viticultural Acad., 1920; L.H.D. (hon.), St. Mary's Coll., 1974; D.Public Service (hon.), U. San Francisco; m. Hanna Gruenbaum, July 5, 1936; children—David George, Carolynn Anne. Came to U.S., 1938, naturalized, 1943. Export dir. N. Fromm, Bingen, Germany, 1924-33; v.p. Picker-Lintz Importers, Inc., N.Y.C., 1937-44; exec. v.p. Fromm & Sichel, Inc., N.Y.C., also San Francisco, 1944-65, pres., 1965-73, chmn. bd., chief exec. officer, 1973—; dir. Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, Inc. Dir. Calif. Med. Clinic for Psychotherapy, San Francisco, 1964—. Mem. nat. council Eleanor Roosevelt Meml. Found., N.Y.C.; trustee San Francisco Conservatory Music; regent St. Mary's Coll., Moraga; v.p. Jewish Nat. Fund; bd. dirs. San Francisco Opera Assn.; founder, pres. Wine Mus., San Francisco. Clubs: Concordia, Commonwealth (San Francisco). Contbr. articles profl. jours. Home: 850 El Camino del Mar San Francisco CA 94121 Office: 655 Beach St San Francisco CA 94109

From *Who's Who in America*
42nd Edition, 1982-83

100 MILLION EMPTY GLASSES

Address by Alfred Fromm, Executive Vice President, Fromm and Sichel, Inc., San Francisco, New York, and Chicago, World Sales Agents for The Christian Brothers Wines, Champagnes and Brandy, before the Advertising Club of San Diego, National Wine Week Luncheon, at the El Cortez Hotel, San Diego, October 16, 1957

Mr. Chairman, honored guests, members and friends of the Advertising Club of San Diego, ladies and gentlemen:

It is my great pleasure to bring you the warm and friendly greetings of California's 35,000 grape and wine growers -- growers who, at this very moment, are busily gathering in the vintage.

For this is the peak of the harvest season, and in the hills and valleys of our great State, from San Diego to Eureka, from the coast to the Sierras, busy hands move the crop from vine to vat amid the fresh aroma of the bubbling juice.

And this, too, is National Wine Week -- set aside each year at this time by official State proclamation to honor one of California's most important industries and to focus public national attention upon the products of our abundant vines.

I am most grateful for this opportunity to speak to you of wine in the historic City of San Diego. It was almost at our very door step here, beside the Mission bearing your fair city's name, that the first wine grape vineyards were planted by Father Junipero Serra just 188 years ago, marking the birth of grape and wine culture in California.

Wine, it has been said, is one of man's greatest gifts, bestowed by Nature in one of her more loving moods. To the truth of this, we of the wine industry most emphatically subscribe. It is sometimes difficult to be prosaic about the product by which we live -- a product extolled in Bible and legend, in verse and narrative, in song and art. Yes, even completely outside of our industry there are tens of thousands of men and women in all of life's walks who regularly foregather to pay homage and tribute to the vintager's artistry. To mention but a few: The Wine and Food Societies, The Societies of the Medical Friends of Wine, The Wine Appreciation Societies, The Gourmet Societies, and many more. They form the inner, active circle of an ever growing public on whom the quality producers of California's premium wines and champagnes largely depend. They do not represent, however, the great American public whose attitude toward wine, we were glad to have confirmed in a recent study by opinion analyst Elmo Roper, is friendly and favorable. The great American public, Roper found, thinks of wine in most cordial receptive terms but they think of it as something special, to be enjoyed not just every day but chiefly on special occasions.

We produce in California a wide range of good wines in different price classes. Coming from an old wine family in Germany myself, I can tell you with all my conviction that the average wine of California is consistently better than the average wine of Italy, France, or Germany. Too, wine is made here under more advanced scientific and sanitary conditions than is the case in Europe.

I am not talking about the very small quantity of fine European vintage wines that are produced once in a while in good years and due to their rarity have to be sold at very fancy prices, but about all other European wines. This is not only a personal conviction but a fact that has been proven time and again in an extended series of blind wine tastings. People of all classes and tastes from layman to connoisseur have participated in these tastings, and have not only, in the majority of cases, failed to identify the origin of the wine as being European or Californian but, furthermore, the overwhelming majority have expressed their taste preference for California premium wines.

We are proud and happy as Americans of the high score California has had in these tastings. Most heartening to us was the average cost of the California wines which were subject to these tastings and which were purchased in stores throughout the country. Their cost averaged $1.35 per bottle of wine, whereas the European wines cost an average of $3.57 per bottle. The average cost of the California premium champagnes, which scored so heavily over the champagnes of our French colleagues, was $4.41 compared to $8.83.

The growing of fine wines in California has been, and is being, spearheaded by the producers of premium wines. None of these is a volume producer and their aggregate production amounts to only about 5% of California's total production, but it is a significant group indeed from the standpoint of pioneering the name of California as one of the world's great wine producing regions.

However, the fact that wine has not found the place it rightfully deserves in the American pattern of living is not caused by economic factors. The large producers in California furnish to the consumer a worthwhile product at very reasonable cost, and even the finest premium wines are within the reach of millions of people.

What, then, is our problem? A few figures will give you the idea: Wine consumption in Western Europe varies from 15 to 30 gallons per capita annually. In the United States, on the other hand, the figure is only 0.9. What's more, beer consumption in this country is a whopping 16 gallons per capita, coffee 27 gallons, and even soft drinks are consumed at the rate of 12 gallons per inhabitant. In California the situation is, of course, much better than in the rest of the country for here we consume close to 3 gallons per capita annually, but even here we feel we have not begun to tap the potential of the market for wines. Looking again at the country as a whole, our best estimates tell us that 85% of all the wine is consumed by roughly 15% of the population or, conversely, that 85% of the people consume only 15% of the wine. You do not need a slide rule to see what would happen if we could bring these 85% who now use little or no wine to consume only as much as the remaining 15%.

Actually, we as an industry have been hard at work to develop a larger market for wine in this country. We are critical of ourselves though, and engage in continuous self examination as to what we can do. The problem of increased consumption has been tackled on seven broad fronts, as follows:

First, we developed several new wine types that have found high public favor, particularly with people who seldom had used wine before. Outstanding among these new types are the mellow red wines often called "Vino", and the gay, colorful Rosés whose popularity is increasing rapidly.

Second, we took wine out of the category of a commodity and began to create wine brand consciousness. This was done by greatly intensifying our efforts in the areas of merchandising and advertising.

Third, we stepped up industry trade educational work with store keepers and clerks, restauranteurs and waiters, and our distributors and their salesmen. The Wine Institute and the Wine Advisory Board have contributed importantly to the success of this phase of the program.

Fourth, we broadened and extended industry public relations work with consumers. The Wine Institute's Study Course -- in which I would urge all of you to enroll -- has been of significant value in communicating facts about wine to the public. Recently the public relations firm of Hill and Knowlton has been retained by the Industry to assist in developing public interest in our wines, particularly with people who mold public opinion.

Fifth, we have undertaken many new research projects in such diverse fields as wine economics, consumer taste preferences, consumer attitudes, the great benefits of wine in the field of medicine, and numerous others. These have helped materially to improve our understanding of the industry and some of this research may one day open up whole new vistas of wine as an integral part of the American way of life. At this point, it is befitting to express the Industry's gratitude to the University of California for its unselfish devotion and high standards of achievement in many of these research projects.

Sixth, and most important of all, we intensified our work in quality improvement in all phases. Large acreages of improved grape varieties were planted to produce finer wines. Lessons learned from intensive research were applied to the handling of grapes, crushing and fermentation. Larger and larger inventories of wines were set aside for aging each year to create a solid foundation of improved quality on which to build the increased sales we confidently expect.

And, finally, we invested many millions of dollars in wine production, aging and bottling facilities and equipment that are the most modern to be found anywhere in the world. All of these things were done -- and, for that matter, are continuing to be done -- to bring the consumer the best possible product we are capable of producing. Truly, it can be said that California wines in all price classes today are of distinctly higher quality than ever before in history.

These efforts have paid off handsomely, particularly in three products of the wine industry -- Champagne, Vermouth and Brandy.

Sales of California champagne have risen 150% in the last 10 years, compared to about 35% for table wines and less than 10% for dessert wines. The reasons for this remarkable growth are quite clear. We have improved our quality tremendously, heightened the attractiveness of our packaging, developed strong point-of-sale techniques and kept prices at moderate levels.

While California champagnes were tripling in volume, imports increased less than half as much during these past ten years. People discovered that California champagne quality is second to none in the world -- including the choicest imports selling at double or more the California champagne price. Today, American champagnes outsell the foreign product almost three to one and the spread is widening.

Much the same thing has happened with Vermouth. Right after Repeal in 1933, and for years thereafter, France and Italy supplied practically all the United States Vermouth demand. Now the pattern is changing rapidly. California vermouth sales have more than doubled in the past ten years and are fast catching up with the import volume. The American public has learned -- just as they learned with champagne -- that the California product is tops in the vermouth field and twice as good a buy as the import.

So, too, with California brandy. Only even more so, because the California product now sells at two and one-half times the rate of foreign brandy. Here is a shining example of quality improvement, merchandising and brand development paying off. California brandy is achieving fast-growing recognition as the most versatile, the most pleasing of all spirit beverages. Patiently aged for years under United States Government supervision, California brandy is enjoying the greatest market advances in its long history -- and the outlook is for more of the same.

You will now have realized that we are faced with an inherent paradox: on the one hand we are proud of the association of wine in the minds of the public as a contribution to better living. Yet, on the other hand, we must fit wine into the picture of hamburger, apple pie, and the general pattern of everyday American living. Ladies and gentlemen, the necessity of resolving this paradox is what we as an industry bring before you. And it is only you who can work with us on this job. To do this we must, through you, communicate to the American public the good and simple facts about wine. We must convey the fact that wine is a food beverage, to be enjoyed with other foods, or just by itself, and for its own goodness. It must help to motivate the millions of people who are friendly toward wine to emerge from their apathy, and to discover wine's pleasures.

In which direction should our advertising be channeled?

Today, there are uncounted millions of younger people -- the newly marrieds, the thirty and forty-year olds -- women especially -- who know little or nothing about wine. Many of them yearn to know, or would if their attention were directed to the virtues of wine.

Wine's most important place, however, is in the home, on the family table. Its pleasurable and temperate use will set the pattern for the generation now growing up and a civilized approach to wine when they become adults. In this area, more than in any other, the future of the wine industry rests.

Effective advertising can help sell a worthy product or service. And wine is no exception. At this point you are in a key position for you are the connecting link between our industry, ready and anxious to serve the public, and a public enjoying an unsurpassed standard of living, with more leisure time than ever in which to enjoy the good things of life.

We realize that advertising alone cannot solve our problems but it must carry a very important share of the common effort.

I think I speak for all of us in the wine industry in saying that we today have a very different idea of the relationship between advertising and our work. Whereas only a few years ago, an advertising agency meant to us only an intermediary, we realize today the many other vital services that the advertising profession offers us and we gratefully avail ourselves of them.

We now work closely with the advertising agency of the Wine Advisory Board, Roy Durstine Co., and the agencies for our respective brands in all matters concerning merchandising, such as packaging, the development of trade marks, point of purchase material, promotional literature, etc., and even production has often been influenced considerably by the advertising profession who is in daily touch with the consumer, his needs, and his preferences.

Last year when I had the pleasure of speaking during National Wine Week to the Advertising Club of Los Angeles, I stuck my neck out in predicting a 100% increase in wine consumption within the following five years. I am happy to say a year later that my head is still on my shoulders, and it is my hope to keep it there for the next four years. There is no telling how far the wine business can go in this country, and I believe that you and we together will succeed in fashioning the key to unlock the cabinets and shelves throughout the Nation, behind which 100 Million Empty Glasses stand ready to be filled with the good wine of our own State.
Thank you very much.

1882 CENTENNIAL 1982

THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

For further information contact: Ron Batori
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NAPA, CALIFORNIA, September 22, 1983. . . Brother David Brennan, F.S.C., President and Chairman of the Board of Mont La Salle Vineyards has announced an agreement to acquire for an undisclosed sum certain business assets of Fromm & Sichel, Inc., a wholly owned subsidiary of Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, Inc., related to the distribution of THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS brandy and wines as well as the facilities for the aging and bottling of brandy.

The acquisition is being made by a newly formed company in which the majority of common stock is to be owned by senior management of Mont La Salle Vineyards and the newly formed company, and the balance by Mont La Salle Vineyards, producers of THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS brandy and wine. In making this announcement, Brother David said,

> "The new company, which will retain the name Fromm & Sichel, Inc., will provide the foundation for growth in the marketing and sales of THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS brandy and wine.

more. . .

Brother David has also announced that R. Paul Toeppen is Chairman of the Board of Directors and Chief Executive Officer of the new company. Allen M. Nirenstein will be appointed Executive Vice President/Sales.

Brother David added,

> "Importantly, the firm of Albert E. Killeen & Associates, Inc. has been retained to direct the structuring and implementation of marketing, sales, merchandising, promotional and advertising plans, and the development and positioning of new products.
>
> Albert E. Killeen, President of the firm that bears his name, was formerly Vice Chairman of THE COCA COLA COMPANY, and President and Chief Executive Officer of THE WINE SPECTRUM."

In concluding, Brother David said,

> "The formation of the new company, along with new senior management at the winery and significant capital improvements currently in progress, provide a strong foundation for the resurgence and position for growth of THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS brandy and wines."

# # #

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Ruth Teiser

Born in Portland, Oregon; came to the Bay Area in 1932 and has lived here ever since.
Stanford University, B.A., M.A. in English; further graduate work in Western history.
Newspaper and magazine writer in San Francisco since 1943, writing on local history and business and social life of the Bay Area.
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Co-author of Winemaking in California, a history, 1982.
An interviewer-editor in the Regional Oral History Office since 1965.

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